



Interview Summary: Chief Stephen Laforet, City of Windsor

Background

Chief Stephen Laforet has been the Fire Chief of the City of Windsor (the **City**) since 2017. Since that time, he also occupies the role of Community Emergency Management Coordinator (the **CEMC**). The CEMC is notably responsible for the development and administration of the City's emergency response plan,¹ as further explained below.

Chief Laforet has been a firefighter for the City since 1990. He became Deputy Fire Chief in 2011, before taking on his current role. Since he became Fire Chief and CEMC, Chief Laforet has been involved in the management of various emergencies, including floods, power outages, tornadoes, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chief Laforet was interviewed by Natalia Rodriguez, Jean-Simon Schoenholz, and Sajeda Hedaraly on September 1, 2022. Questions about this summary should be directed to Jean-Simon Schoenholz.

Text contained in square brackets are explanatory notes provided by Commission Counsel to assist the reader.

Emergency Response Framework of the City

The City of Windsor Emergency Response Plan² is an all-hazards plan that provides a framework for dealing with all types of emergencies. The City's response can be adapted to the emergency at hand.

The Community Control Group (the **CCG**) is a group of officials that has an oversight role over the municipality's response in an emergency.³ It includes the Police Chief, the Mayor, the Chief Administrative Officer, all of the City's Corporate Leadership Team, the Essex-Windsor Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Chief, and Chief Laforet. The CCG meets for training and an annual training exercise, and otherwise meet on an as-needed basis. The Emergency Operations Center (the **EOC**) is a central, physical location attached to a fire station from where emergency response can be coordinated.

During the blockade of the Ambassador Bridge, it was apparent that the Windsor Police Service (the **WPS**) would be Incident Command, as the response was to a public order emergency. The role of the CCG was to coordinate the City response so that it supported

¹ [Ontario Regulation 380/04](#), section 10

² Emergency Response Plan, **WIN00001054**.

³ [Ontario Regulation 380/04](#), section 12; Emergency Response Plan, section 5.0, **WIN00001054**



the WPS, as well as to ensure a good flow of information between the WPS and the City. The CCG supported police operations with logistics, communications, and back office support.

The WPS operated out of the EOC with the Ontario Provincial Police (the **OPP**). Emily Bertram, the Emergency Planning Officer for the City, attended the EOC daily to support the police operations. Chief Laforet attended the EOC on only one or two occasions. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (the **RCMP**), other police services, representatives of the Canada Border Services Agency (the **CBSA**), and Mr. Phong Nguy, the City's Manager of Maintenance, Field and Contracts, were also present at the EOC from time to time.

Border Crossings and Jurisdiction

There are currently four border crossings between the City and Detroit, with a fifth under construction:

- The Detroit-Windsor Tunnel;
- The Ambassador Bridge (the **Bridge**);
- The Michigan Central Railway Tunnel;
- The Detroit-Windsor Truck Ferry; and
- The Gordie Howe International Bridge (under construction).

The Bridge is privately owned and serves as an important trade route between the United States and Canada. It can be accessed from Huron Church Road, a municipal road, which itself connects to Highway 401. The 401 is policed by the OPP, while Huron Church Road is policed by the WPS. The Bridge has a secondary access point on Wyandotte Street. Response to emergencies on the Bridge is usually from municipal emergency services, although there will usually be some coordination with the CBSA.

The blockade of the Bridge, further discussed below, started on February 7, 2022 at the intersection of Huron Church Road and College Street, the intersection located just next to the Bridge. The access point on Wyandotte Street was also eventually blocked.

While the City was concerned that protesters would attempt to blockade the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, there was no reason to believe, based on available intelligence, that it would be targeted by the protesters.

Arrival of the Freedom Convoy and Pre-Blockade Planning

Chief Laforet first heard of the Freedom Convoy's anticipated arrival in the City a few days prior to the blockade on February 7, 2022. The WPS was already monitoring "slow roll" protests that had been occurring in the City. ["Slow roll" protests are protests that disrupt but do not completely stop traffic flow.]

The City's main source of information regarding the Convoy's activities was the WPS. Ms. Bertram had discussions with her counterparts in Sarnia and Niagara to get



situational reports. The City also received some inquiries from Emergency Management Ontario (“**EMO**”), who shared situational reports with the City.

The WPS inquired with Chief Laforet about the use of the EOC prior to the blockade. Chief Laforet scheduled meetings of the CCG in order to coordinate the municipal emergency response and streamline WPS and City communications. Chief Laforet wanted to ensure that the City took no independent action that could impede law enforcement operations.

The Blockade

The Beginning of the Blockade

The blockade of the Bridge began on February 7, 2022.

The first meeting of the CCG related to the blockade took place that morning.⁴ At that point in time, one lane of traffic remained open. During the meeting, the WPS explained that the protests were peaceful but that it had a plan in place if the protests worsened. The CCG discussed preparations for the blockade, including the mobilization of barricades and towing resources.

Later in the evening, the Bridge was entirely blocked. There was one semi-trailer truck on the off ramp and multiple passenger vehicles blocking the intersection of Huron Church Road and College Street.

Chief Laforet was worried about his ability to provide firefighter services to some areas of the City during the blockade. In his capacity as Fire Chief, he made the decision to relocate some firefighters along with their apparatus to the Major FA Tilston Armoury & Police Training Centre.

The City's Role in the Response to the Convoy

The City made the EOC available for police operations, and ensured it was equipped with staff support and appropriate technology.

On or around February 5, 2022, the WPS asked the City to provide barricades, which were to be used to block the areas that the WPS would clear. Following this request, as the City did not have sufficient barricades, it reached out to contractors and neighboring municipalities to source additional barricades. It only obtained approximately 50 barricades from these actors. The City then began conversations with EMO in order to request assistance from the provincial government. As preparations were underway, the City was told that the OPP could make a Ministry-to-Ministry request. The OPP therefore

⁴ CCG Meeting Minutes, February 7, 2022, **WIN00002204**.



made a request to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation to source additional barricades and, eventually, 1,300 were received.

Prior to barricades arriving, the strategy was to use vehicles to block roads. The City therefore sourced vehicles that it owned and requested vehicles from other municipalities for this purpose.

The City has a towing company on contract, but it was unclear whether that company would have sufficient tow trucks to assist the WPS. The City provided the contact information for this towing company to the WPS but was not otherwise involved in securing tow trucks.

Throughout the blockade and police efforts to keep the Bridge clear in the weeks following, several City staff assisted the WPS, notably by providing administrative support and supporting communication efforts.

The End of the Blockade

On February 11, 2022, the City and others obtained an injunction. Chief Laforet was aware of the injunction but not otherwise involved in the process.

On that evening, the WPS advised Chief Laforet that it would begin the dismantling of the blockade the next morning, without providing details. The City assisted the WPS by placing barricades and vehicles in areas cleared by law enforcement. The Bridge was successfully cleared the afternoon of February 13, 2022.

The City declared a state of emergency on February 14, 2022. Chief Laforet had been consulted on this possibility three days earlier and was of the view that there were few advantages or disadvantages to such a declaration.⁵ =

Chief Laforet does not know whether the WPS used the powers provided under the provincial emergency or the *Emergencies Act*.

Costs of the Blockade

The blockade of the Bridge caused a loss of approximately 320 million dollars in international trade per day.

The blockade also had a detrimental impact on local manufacturing and local businesses, especially those located along Huron Church Road. Residents of the City were also

⁵ Email from Chief Laforet to Jason Reynar, Chief Administrative Officer, February 11, 2022, **WIN00000410**.



affected by the blockade, as it impeded their travel to and from their homes and disrupted the university and high school located near the Bridge.

The blockade cost approximately 6 million dollars to the City itself, including the costs of barricades and of policing services.

Closing Thoughts

Chief Laforet stressed the importance of having an operational plan to respond to this type of emergency, supported by the City as a whole. He also suggested that there was room for improvement in coordination between various levels of government including with respect to access to resources.